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SUBJECT: DART REPORT: IRANIAN REFUGEES IN IRAQ

SUMMARY

1. This is a DART report. Several thousand Iranian refugees are being pressured to leave their homes in Iraq and return to Iran, where some fear they will be killed, jailed, or face other repressive measures by the Government of Iran. Since the Coalition defeated the former Government of Iraq, armed Iraqis in the southern part of the country have threatened the refugees, seized their homes and farmland, and ordered them out of Iraq. UNHCR has met with Iranian refugee representatives and local Iraqi tribal leaders, but there has been no noticeable reduction of tensions between the two groups. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

2. This is a DART report. The DART visited the town of Dujaila-Al Hindia on 20 May, approximately 40 kilometers (km) southeast of the Iraqi city of Al Kut. The town is a baked-brick compound built in the 1980s that currently houses approximately 450 Iranian refugee families, or about 2500 refugees, and a handful of Iraqi squatters. Some Iranian refugees say Iraqi troops captured them during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and forced them into Iraq. Some Iraqis complain that at least a few Iranians willingly moved to Iraq because they were given large parcels of land by the former regime. Other Iranians at the compound are descendants of the original refugees who settled in the area.

3. The DART discussed the refugees' issues with an estimated 60 Iranian sheikhs and heads of households. The refugees acknowledged they were given a total of 17,000 dunams of land by the former regime (one dunam equals 2500 square feet) and had been cultivating the land for years without interference, growing wheat, melons, cucumbers, and tomatoes.

INTIMIDATION BY LOCAL IRAQIS

4. Since the defeat of the former regime, the refugees said gangs of Iraqis, brandishing automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, pistols, and hand grenades, have threatened them several times and told them they must leave Iraq. One farmer said he had been told he could harvest his wheat crop in the coming weeks but after that he would have to leave the area. Another farmer reported that Iraqis seized his 75 dunams of land and allowed their cattle, sheep and goats to graze on his vegetable crops. Another farmer said an Iraqi man and his seven brothers seized his 35 dunams of land and brought their wives and children to the land to show them their new property.

5. Because of the threats, approximately 500 Iranians fled their homes near Al Kut in early April and established a makeshift camp at the heavily-mined Sharhani border crossing point, at the Iraq-Iran border, while they waited for Iran's permission to enter the country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) negotiated the repatriation on 22 May of 180 of the Iranian refugees from the border post, the first such group allowed to return to Iran in nearly one year. Hundreds of other refugees refused to cross back into Iran after border authorities told them their livestock would not be permitted into the country.

6. UNHCR has been working with the Iranian government to organize the refugees' return, which was stopped by the

Iraqi government shortly before the war. Before the program was suspended, UNHCR had assisted in the return of 1,050 Iranian refugees from Iraq.

17. The refugees in Dujaila- Al Hindia met recently with a representative of UNHCR from Basrah to express their concerns over the Iraqis' intimidation campaign, and they said the UNHCR official also met with Iraqi tribal leaders. But they said there has been no discernible decrease of tension within the community.

18. The tense atmosphere in the Dujaila-Al Hindia community was underscored during the DART meeting with the collective's Iranian leaders by the appearance outside the meeting room of an Iraqi man, armed with an AK-47 automatic weapon, who jumped into a waiting vehicle and sped off, and the sound of a gunshot shortly thereafter. The meeting broke up, and two Iranian men, nervously speaking under their breath, warned the DART that the shot was a 'provocation' and that it would be better if the DART left the area immediately, which it did.

19. According to refugees at Dujaila-Al Hindia, ten refugees were killed and seven injured when a missile exploded ten days ago at an Iranian refugee encampment at the Iran-Iraq border crossing point 90 km northeast of Al Amarah. The encampment, with approximately 500 Iranian refugees, is in a desert area surrounded by mines and unexploded ordnance left over from the Iran-Iraq war.

110. Two of the refugee men at the 20 May meeting, both farmers, traveled to Basrah and waited for three days to meet again with the DART to seek help in securing refuge in a country other than Iraq or Iran.

111. One of the men said he sold his wedding ring to raise the 50,000 Iraqi dinars needed to make the roundtrip from Dujaila-Al Hindia. He said it was a small sacrifice if it meant that he could appeal to the DART again to urge that he and other families be resettled in a safer country, where their children could grow up without having to face the repression known by their parents.

THREATS BY IRANIAN AGENTS

112. One man told the DART that after the war began on 20 March, the Iranian government sent five Iranian 'agents' to the compound. He said the men threatened the refugees and their families, telling them that if they cooperated with U.S. authorities or talked to any international agencies about their situation they would be killed. He said the 'agents' have since left the compound and returned to Iran. But he added that some refugees in Dujaila-Al Hindia cooperate with Iranian authorities for fear they or their families will be punished once they are repatriated. The man asked the DART several times to keep his identity confidential and said, "If Iran knows we met you, we won't

SIPDIS
see our families again."

113. The same man said that the majority of refugees at the collective originally opposed the idea of going back to Iran but changed their minds after the Iraqi threats and intimidation.

114. The refugee said that 25 Iranian refugee families, or approximately 150 people, living in the Dujaila collective and in Diwaniyah continue to oppose the idea of returning because of potential persecution by the Iranian government. It is not a fear without foundation. He and the other farmer who met with the DART in Basrah returned to Iran during the 1990s, and both were jailed for more than a year, accused of being opponents of the Iranian government.

115. He said his neighbors are pleading with him to change the names of his three children before they are repatriated to Iran because their names are of Arab origin and not Shiite. He said he will refuse to do so, and will continue to resist repatriation to Iran. He said he is so opposed to returning to Iran that he would willingly give up his Shiite Muslim religion and resettle in Israel if permitted to do so.

116. Those Iranian refugees who oppose repatriation say they hope the United States can help arrange a safe haven for them, away from the threats and harassment they now face in Iraq and possibly in the future, if they are returned to Iran.

JONES